NEW ART CONCEPT : OCEAN ART

1. Definition and Origins of Ocean Art

Ocean Art refers to creative works made directly in or with the ocean, using the sea as both medium and site, much as Land Art used the terrestrial landscape. Land art (or earth art) was originally defined in the 1960s–70s conceptual art movement as art made in the landscape, sculpting the land itself or constructing with natural materials like rocks or twigs. By analogy, ***Ocean Art*** carries this intervention beyond the shore: artists create in situ within marine environments – submerging sculptures, orchestrating performances in water, or using tides and marine life as dynamic artistic materials.

Recently articulated by artist-theorist David Pisani, in collaboration with ocean-based artist Emma-Claire Fierce during her first stay in 2025 at the BRAZZA RESIDENCY funded by Elise Billiard and David Pisani, the term "*Ocean Art*" defines the ocean not as a backdrop rather as an active canvas and conceptual context — extending the radical lineage of Land Art into the fluid, dynamic, and mythically charged element of the salted water.

Its conceptual roots lie in the same impulse that drove Land Art pioneers to break free from galleries: a desire to situate art in the **environment** itself. Early hints of ***Ocean Art*** appeared in late 20th-century works that engaged the sea as a site. For example, Robert Smithson's iconic *Spiral Jetty* (1970) – an earthwork coil built into the Great Salt Lake – already blurred boundaries between land and water. Conceptual artists soon pushed further: in 1980 Betty Beaumont created *Ocean Landmark*, an artificial reef of coal fly-ash blocks sunk off Fire Island, New York, signaling that even the unseen ocean depths could host artistic intervention. Such projects foreshadowed Pisani's formal definition of ***Ocean Art*** as a distinct genre emerging from the legacy of Land Art.

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) – an iconic Land Art earthwork spiraling into the pink waters of Great Salt Lake – exemplifies how Land artists sculpted the landscape itself. ***Ocean Art*** builds on this legacy by taking art off solid ground and into the fluid, unpredictable space of the ocean. As with Land Art's origins in Conceptualism, the emphasis is on **site-specific** creativity and the integration of natural forces into art's very substance.

2. How *Ocean Art* Emerged from Land Art and Conceptual Practices

Ocean Art has emerged directly from the innovations of Land Art and conceptual art. Land Art's pioneers in the 1960s and '70s (Smithson, Nancy Holt, Michael Heizer, Richard Long, and others) moved art out of museums and into remote landscapes, redefining art as

something embedded in place rather than framed on a wall. This expansion was part of the wider conceptual art ethos that valued ideas and experience over portable objects. Land artworks were often ephemeral or inaccessible and thus experienced through documentation – artists exhibited photographs, maps or samples from the site in galleries. Those conceptual strategies laid groundwork for Ocean Art. If earthworks could exist in deserts and fields, why not in the sea?

Artists began to apply Land Art's logic to ocean environments, leveraging conceptual art's tolerance for art that isn't immediately visible or permanent. Smithson's notion of site/non-site – where a distant outdoor site is represented by proxy materials in a gallery – is especially relevant once art submerges underwater. For example, Beaumont's Ocean Landmark (1980) was conceived within a Land Art framework and placed completely out of sight beneath the Atlantic. Viewers could only apprehend it through mediated means (maps, dive reports, or video), raising the question of how an artwork's meaning changes when "the artwork… is not immediately present" and "must be mediated". In this way, ***Ocean Art*** evolved as a logical extension of conceptual site-specific practice: it pushes the envelope by choosing a site that challenges visibility and access, yet remains true to the Land Art principle of working with the environment rather than merely depicting it.

Importantly, the emergence of ***Ocean Art*** also coincided with rising environmental consciousness and an "oceanic turn" in culture. Just as Land Art's emergence paralleled new ecological and geological thinking in the 1960s, ***Ocean Art*** has grown alongside contemporary awareness of the oceans' significance and fragility. Artists took the conceptual freedom of Land Art – the ability for a walk, a line of stones, or a mound of earth to be art – and applied it to the ocean's context. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, more projects began to treat the ocean itself as collaborator: from expeditions-as-art to installations that incorporate waves and currents. These developments set the stage for Pisani's articulation of ***Ocean Art*** as a cohesive concept, linking the radical outdoor experiments of the 1970s to the multi-disciplinary ocean engagements of today.

3. The Role of the Ocean as Material, Space, and Mythology

In Ocean Art, the ocean is not just a backdrop but the very material and medium of the work. Water, with its salt, waves, and tides, becomes a sculptural element. Ocean artists treat currents and wind as collaborators, embracing the fact that the sea will shape, erode, or even carry away their creations. For instance, Emma-Claire Fierce is optimizing her ocean swimming thru the weather forecats. An artist might use the ebb and flow of tides to draw ephemeral designs on a beach, knowing the next high tide will wash the canvas clean – the ocean thus performs the final act of the piece. Natural ocean substances (salt, sand, shells, algae) often replace traditional art materials. One early example is the salt-encrustation that

naturally formed on Smithson's Spiral Jetty as it spent years underwater, a phenomenon he welcomed as part of the artwork's life. In Ocean Art, such processes are embraced deliberately: artworks might be designed to grow coral or host marine life, literally making marine ecology a medium of the art.

The ocean also offers a radically different space for artists – a boundless, fluid volume as opposed to the fixed solid ground. Underwater, there is no single horizon or stable orientation; gravity feels loosened and human visitors must navigate three-dimensional space among currents. This spatial difference transforms how art is experienced. As artist Doug Aitken observed after submerging sculptures off Catalina Island, on land we move horizontally with a distant horizon, but "when you're diving, there is no fixed point… you're moving through vertical space" and encountering art as a floating presence. ***Ocean Art*** takes place in a living space that is inherently unpredictable and immersive – viewers might have to swim or dive to witness it, becoming acutely aware of their own physical limits. The ocean's space is also a public commons and a vast wilderness, lending ***Ocean Art*** an adventurous, exploratory character akin to deep-sea diving or space travel. It situates art in a place that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere – a paradox of placelessness noted by scholars. This challenges artists to rethink site-specificity: an ocean installation may drift, transform, or be dispersed by the very site it inhabits, making the ocean a co-creator of the work's form over time.

Beyond the physical, the ocean carries immense mythology and symbolism that ***Ocean Art*** can tap into. Culturally, the sea has long been a symbol of the unknown – a source of life, a pathway of exploration, and a force of destruction in myth and lore. By engaging the ocean, artists inevitably converse with this rich mythology. Some ***Ocean Art*** works evoke ancient narratives of the sea: the idea of submerged cities, sea deities, or epic voyages. For example, an underwater sculpture garden of human figures might suggest Atlantis or a ritual undersea community, resonating with our collective imagination of lost civilizations beneath the waves. The ocean's sublime qualities – its vastness, depth, and mystery – infuse ***Ocean Art*** with themes of awe and humility. In a contemporary sense, the ocean is also a scientific and ecological icon (the cradle of life and regulator of climate), giving ***Ocean Art*** a potent metaphorical arsenal. Artists often frame the ocean as a protagonist or partner, reflecting posthumanist ideas that decenter humanity in favor of a more fluid, "aquatic" worldview. In practical terms, this means ***Ocean Art*** may strive to give the ocean a voice or highlight its narratives: works that incorporate whale songs, ocean data, or indigenous sea lore use art to bridge mythos and science. The role of the ocean in these artworks is multifaceted – it is material (water, salt, life), space (a venue with unique physics), and mythology (a source of meaning and metaphor) all at once, making ***Ocean Art*** a deeply resonant and complex discipline.

4. Key Differences Between Land Art and *Ocean Art* (with Examples)

Ocean Art shares Land Art's pioneering spirit but differs in crucial ways due to the nature of its medium. Below are key differences, each highlighted with artistic examples that contrast ***Ocean Art*** with its Land Art predecessors:

Visibility and Accessibility: Land Art works are often remote but ultimately visible to the determined visitor – one can drive to Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or stand within Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. In contrast, many ***Ocean Art*** pieces are invisible to the casual observer, hidden beneath water or manifest only at certain times. Beaumont's *Ocean Landmark* (1980) exemplified this: an artwork intentionally sunk out of sight, "available to see" only through diving or indirect documentation. While Land Art had to be documented in photos for gallery display, ***Ocean Art*** almost only exists via its documentation for most audiences. This fundamental invisibility means ***Ocean Art*** **embraces a level of conceptual abstraction even greater than Land Art** – the idea of the work and its ecological presence can outweigh its immediate visual presence.

Environment and Ephemerality: Land Art is built into relatively stable earth (even if wind and rain erode it slowly). By contrast, ***Ocean Art*** operates in a highly dynamic environment – saltwater, waves, currents, marine organisms – that ensures change. Ocean works tend to be ephemeral or ever-changing by design. For instance, Andy Goldsworthy's land works (arrangements of leaves, stones, ice) are famously short-lived, but an ocean tidal artwork may vanish within hours or minutes as the sea reclaims it. Doug Aitken noted that underwater art can be "living and continuously changing," with no idea "what's happening now" to the piece once it's under the ocean's sway. An ***Ocean Art*** sculpture might develop a coat of algae, be transformed by coral growth, or be physically moved by storms. This stands in contrast to, say, Walter De Maria's Lightning Field or Richard Long's stone lines, which, though outdoors, remain comparatively static. **Time and tide become active agents in *Ocean Art*. The works evolve and even dissolve, emphasizing process over permanence.**

Materials and Life Forms: Land Art typically uses inert natural materials – soil, rocks, timber – shaped by human action. ***Ocean Art,*** on the other hand, often incorporates living materials and ecological processes. A prime example is the work of Jason deCaires Taylor, a sculptor who installs figures on the seafloor designed to become artificial reefs. His pieces fuse Land Art's use of natural material with ecological intent: once submerged, the sculptures are colonized by corals and fish, literally coming to life. Taylor's underwater museums (e.g. the *Cancún Underwater Museum*) use a "fusion of Land Art traditions" in the ocean, creating works that encourage marine life and highlight environmental issues like coral loss and climate change. In contrast, classic Land Art works like Heizer's *Double Negative* (a massive cut in the earth) or Smithson's *Broken Circle* simply reposition earth materials; **they do not intentionally engage wildlife or ongoing natural growth.** ***Ocean Art*** frequently blurs the line between artwork and habitat, making the thriving of non-human life part of the aesthetic and ethical outcome.

Technical and Experiential Challenges: Building art in the ocean demands different techniques and technologies than on land. Land artists in the 1970s sometimes used heavy machinery (bulldozers sculpted *Spiral Jetty* out of rock and mud), but the execution remained in the open air. ***Ocean artists*** contend with a far more challenging medium: works must withstand salt corrosion, strong currents, and pressure, and the act of creation often happens underwater. As Aitken recounted, putting a sculpture even "four feet under the ocean" introduces a host of issues – buoyancy, currents, marine growth – that don't exist on land. Artists might need diving gear, submersible technology, even collaboration with oceanographers or engineers to realize their vision. This means ***Ocean Art*** projects are often interdisciplinary from the start. The experience for the viewer is likewise transformed: instead of hiking to a desert sculpture, one might have to scuba dive to an underwater installation, negotiating personal risk and the unfamiliar underwater environment. ***Ocean Art*** is thus inherently experiential and participatory in a different way – it situates the human viewer as a guest in a non-human world (as Parley for the Oceans founder Cyrill Gutsch put it, under the sea "you're a guest, and very fragile" amidst the tranquility and danger). Land Art by contrast keeps the viewer's experience earthbound and within human physiological comfort (breathable air, solid ground).

Thematic Focus and Purpose: While Land Art was often an effort to reconnect with nature or explore geological time, it was not always explicitly ecological in message. ***Ocean Art,*** emerging in an era of climate crisis, tends to carry environmental and social urgency. Many ***Ocean Art*** works explicitly aim to raise awareness about ocean conservation, climate change, or the interconnection of humans and oceans. For example, Taylor's reef sculptures double as environmental interventions, and contemporary artists' ocean-based performances often address issues like plastic pollution or rising sea levels. The ocean context inherently brings to the fore themes of global interdependence (since oceans connect continents and regulate climate). Land Art's narrative was sometimes about the entropy of man-made objects versus nature (Smithson talked of entropy in his earthworks), but ***Ocean Art***'s narrative frequently centers on renewal or vulnerability – the bleaching of a coral reef, the melting of polar ice, the migrations of sea creatures. This difference in focus makes ***Ocean Art*** not just a formal extension of Land Art, but a conceptual update that aligns art with current planetary concerns.

IMAGE CREDIT REQUIRED

Underwater sculpture installation "Vicissitudes" (2006) by Jason deCaires Taylor in Grenada.

In this ***Ocean Art*** example, life-size figures are arranged in a ring on the seafloor to be gradually transformed into an artificial coral reef. The work changes over time as corals and marine organisms colonize the figures, illustrating ***Ocean Art***'s embrace of living processes and ephemerality. By contrast, Land Art predecessors like Andy Goldsworthy's stone or ice arrangements on land, or Richard Long's walks that mark the soil, were ephemeral but did not directly foster new life. ***Ocean Art*** differentiates itself by merging artistic intent **with ecological growth and change, resulting in creations that are co-produced by nature.**

5. *Ocean Art* as a Contemporary Discipline (New Terminology, Performance, Environment, etc.)

Today, ***Ocean Art*** is coalescing into a recognized contemporary discipline, supported by new terminology and interdisciplinary approaches. Scholars and curators speak of an "aquatic turn" in the arts, and terms like blue humanities and critical ocean studies have entered academic discourse to frame how we think about ocean-centric culture. This intellectual movement provides ***Ocean Art*** with theoretical grounding and legitimacy akin to Land Art's place in art history. In practical terms, a growing number of artists now self-identify their work with the ocean as Emma-Claire Fierce when she wrote on her social medias *"oceans are my canva"*– echoing Pisani's definition – and new institutions are responding. We see specialized art residencies on coastlines and research vessels, ocean-themed biennales and exhibitions, and hybrid art-science projects focusing on marine issues. Such platforms encourage artists to adopt the ocean as both subject and collaborator, expanding the discipline's vocabulary. For example, curators like Stefanie Hessler use concepts like "Tidalectics" to suggest a fluid, non-linear way of thinking drawn from the ocean's rhythms, proposing an alternative to the rigid structures of older art theories. This kind of ocean-derived theory feeds into the language artists use to describe their process, emphasizing ideas of flux, immersion, and interconnectivity.

Ocean Art's contemporary practice is notably interdisciplinary. Artists often work closely with marine scientists, environmental activists, or local communities, blurring lines between artistic creation, scientific research, and ecological stewardship. New terminology reflects this blend: artists talk about eco-art, social sculpture, or participatory science-art in the ocean context. Performance art has also found a place in ***Ocean Art***– sometimes termed aquatic performance or sea choreography. For instance, artists like Emma-Claire Fierce, have staged performances where swimmers trace shapes in the water visible only via GPS, or where free-divers interact with underwater sculptures, turning viewership into an embodied aquatic experience. Such performances highlight the body's relationship to water, tying into the idea of the "oceanic" self that critical theory explores (the notion that human identity can be fluid and ocean-connected). Even traditional media are being revisited: painters use saltwater and algae pigments, sound artists compose with underwater hydrophone recordings, and sculptors design works meant to be completed by ocean forces. All these innovations indicate that ***Ocean Art*** is developing its own techniques and modes of expression – a toolbox distinct from Land Art's bulldozers and stone circles.

Another hallmark of ***Ocean Art*** as a discipline is its ethical and environmental engagement. In the 2020s, as the climate crisis accelerates, artists are acutely aware of the ocean's central role in Earth's ecosystem. ***Ocean Art*** often aligns with environmental activism, bringing creative insight to issues like coral reef restoration, ocean pollution, and rising seas. The discipline has spawned new hybrid roles: artist-divers who document bleaching reefs, or "artivists" who organize community beach art projects to draw attention to plastic waste. This infusion of purpose does not reduce the artistic value; rather, it imbues ***Ocean Art*** with

contemporary relevance and urgency. It speaks to academic and artistic audiences alike, demonstrating how art can influence environmental discourse. In fact, marine scientists and policymakers increasingly recognize the value of cultural perspectives – a 2022 UN webinar on "Blue Heritage: The Role of ***Ocean Art*** and Culture in Ocean Science and Management" emphasized that art and storytelling are crucial in reconnecting people with the sea (highlighting exactly the space ***Ocean Art*** fills). Thus, ***Ocean Art*** as a discipline bridges aesthetic innovation, experiential performance, and environmental engagement.

Crucially, this discipline is developing a supportive network. International agencies (like UNESCO's ocean programs) have begun involving artists as ocean ambassadors, and private foundations have launched initiatives (for example, a dedicated Ocean Space in Venice established by TBA21–Academy) to showcase ocean-themed art and research. New critical vocabulary – hydrofeminism, sea-edge aesthetics, planetary blue – is emerging from writers and artists who articulate what it means to create with the ocean. As David Pisani has understood by conceptualizing ***Ocean Art*** while quoting this as the evolution of Land Art, ***Ocean Art*** is not just a niche fad but part of a larger cultural shift toward viewing the planet's waters as central to our shared future. In sum, ***Ocean Art*** today stands as a vibrant, evolving field, supported by new terms, performative practices, and an environmental ethos that together mark it as a key frontier in contemporary art.

6. Propositions for Recognition (Academic, Institutional, Theoretical)

For ***Ocean Art*** to fully mature as a field, it calls for formal recognition on academic, institutional, and theoretical levels. Drawing parallels to how Land Art entered art history textbooks and museum collections, proponents of the subject may argue that ***Ocean Art*** should be studied, preserved, and theorized with equal seriousness. Academically, this means developing curricula and research devoted to ocean-based art – from art history courses that trace its lineage to interdisciplinary seminars bridging art, ecology, and maritime studies. The rise of "critical ocean studies" and the blue humanities is an encouraging sign: scholars such as Elizabeth Deloughrey and art curators like Hessler have already built a discourse that situates ***Ocean Art*** within larger conversations about posthumanism and environmental change. This theoretical framing needs to continue growing. We can imagine dedicated symposia on ***Ocean Art***, journals publishing research on aesthetics of the abyss, and university programs that equip young artists with diving skills alongside studio training. Recognizing ***Ocean Art*** **academically also means acknowledging non-Western and indigenous ocean knowledge,** thus broadening art history's scope to include traditional Pacific navigation art, for example, as part of the ***Ocean Art*** narrative. In short, the academy should legitimize ***Ocean Art*** as a subject of scholarly inquiry, ensuring that future generations understand its concepts and contributions.

Institutionally, museums and galleries can play a huge role in legitimizing Ocean Art. Propositions for action include museums commissioning site-specific ocean works and finding innovative ways to exhibit them (through VR, live feeds, or artifacts brought back from the site). Just as major museums have Land Art in their collections (photographic documentation or even earthworks on their grounds), they can acquire the rights to ***Ocean Art*** pieces or their representations. Aquariums and science centers might collaborate with art institutions to host ***Ocean Art*** installations that engage audiences with both aesthetic and environmental dimensions. Art residencies focused on the ocean (like the BRAŻŻA residency in France's Cognac region, which fosters writers and artists in nature) provide creative development spaces – these should be expanded and funded. Additionally, the preservation of ***Ocean Art*** poses new challenges: institutions may need to consider how to maintain an underwater sculpture park over time or how to archive an ocean performance that can never be repeated in the same form. Embracing these challenges is part of recognizing ***Ocean Art***'s unique character. It may be that new kinds of institutions are needed – perhaps floating museums or research vessels doubling as galleries – to fully support art at sea. The proposition here is bold: to integrate ***Ocean Art*** into the fabric of cultural institutions so thoroughly that an art timeline of the 21st century would be incomplete without the swell of the ocean in its narrative.

Theoretically, recognizing ***Ocean Art*** means expanding our definition of what art can be. ***Ocean Art*** urges art theory to account for transience, collaboration with nature, and multi-sensory experience on a new level. It challenges the primacy of visuality (since many works are not constantly visible) and encourages theory to value context and process as much as object. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary theoretical shifts: for example, the idea of distributed authorship (artworks created by networks of humans and non-humans together) finds concrete expression in coral reef sculptures co-made by artists and polyps. The notion of the sublime in aesthetics also gets a modern update through ***Ocean Art*** – confronting the vastness of the ocean evokes a 21st-century sublime tinged with ecological awareness. Instituting ***Ocean Art*** theoretically might involve developing new frameworks like "Ocean aesthetics" or "hydro-aesthetics" that address how immersion, water dynamics, and marine biology inform artistic meaning. David Pisani's articulation of ***Ocean Art*** is itself a theoretical proposition: that we must name and frame this practice to fully grasp its implications. By proposing ***Ocean Art*** as a defined category, Pisani invites critical discourse to form around it – debate, analysis, manifestos, and reflections that will solidify the concept. This process mirrors how Land Art was theorized by critics like Lucy Lippard and Robert Smithson himself; now ***Ocean Art*** awaits its theorists and critics to do the same, anchoring it in art history and criticism.

In conclusion, ***Ocean Art*** is ready to take its place as a formally recognized discipline in the art world. Its definition and historical lineage from Land Art have been sketched; its unique use of oceanic material, space, and mythos has been demonstrated; its differences from earlier art forms have been elucidated; and its current practice is vibrant and expanding. What remains is a conscious effort to support and study ***Ocean Art***. This means embracing new terminologies and methodologies, encouraging institutions to adapt, and fostering theoretical frameworks that can hold the ocean's fluid reality. As one could note, "the ocean provides a model to accommodate change and unpredictability" – by recognizing ***Ocean Art***, the art

world acknowledges a model of creativity that is as fluid, powerful, and boundless as the ocean itself. With academic rigor, institutional backing, and theoretical insight, ***Ocean Art*** can be firmly anchored in our cultural understanding, ensuring that the dialogue between art and the ocean continues to inspire, challenge, and transform both artistic and public consciousness. This is really a new field opening.

Sources:

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